

Robert Bell

Media Roundtable on Exercise Sabre Strike

June 19, 2014

Mr. Bell: -- going on in Sabre Strike.

Journalist: Ewin McCaskill from the Guardian Newspaper.

As a result of increased tension can we expect an increase in the number of subjects or sizes in the years ahead?

Mr. Bell: It's nice to talk to you, Ewin. I figured out right away from your accent that you were not Danish. [Laughter].

Voice: I can try and talk to you and --

Mr. Bell: We'll keep this in Scottish or English, whichever comes first. My mother was Scottish and my wife is Danish, so between those two I'm not sure where I am. [Laughter].

Ewin, what's been going on the last three months of this crisis is there are always quite a number of national and multinational exercises going on as well as NATO exercises and the key differentiating factor is where the command and control lies. In many cases the kinds of

interoperability training and getting forces to work together is common, whether it's a multinational U.S. led or allied led exercise or a NATO led exercise, but there's been a sense within NATO the last three months that it's important to send a message to the East that NATO is quite serious about Article 5 and its security commitment to all member states within the Alliance.

So we've gone through a process in many cases of looking for exercises that were already scheduled, particularly if NATO was going to be involved, that could be changed into a NATO led training opportunity so as to exercise the command and control elements of the NATO command structure itself and to make perfectly clear that the Alliance is running that exercise.

Now Sabre Strike is a U.S. Army Europe led exercise and it was well advanced and fairly early on the schedule so it's been kept as a U.S. led exercise, albeit with eight other allies plus one partner, Finland, participating, and with NATO of course participating as part of the work as well. But I think what you're going to see over the course of the summer and into the fall is not so much a case of trying to create new exercises to add to the list because to be effective an exercise takes a lot of planning and the work on these exercises begins a year or more in advance. So it's not easy to just decide to have more exercises.

I think what you'll see if this crisis continues is more cases where fairly large multinational exercises that were previously planned may be elevated into a NATO led exercise.

Heidi Plougsgaard, *Jyllands-Posten*: Can I ask, Russia has decided to do a parallel exercise in Kaliningrad. Is that something that causes any kind of worry? What is your response to that?

Mr. Bell: Russia is within its rights, of course, to have exercises as it deems necessary. There are different agreements in place in Europe that sort of regulate notice that's given in terms of exercises based on the size. If Russia wants to call a snap exercise to make a point in response to a NATO exercise, they can of course do so. You can question whether the value of an exercise that's called without adequate preparation is much more than sending a signal, but a more general [comment] I would make, and this is something that the Supreme Allied Commander General Breedlove has said on the record himself these last weeks, NATO is becoming more aware now that quite a bit of investment and effort by the Russians in rebuilding its military the last five or six years has carried them to a point where they can call so-called snap exercises without a lot of advance notice, and then assemble conventional power in those training formations from which they can project military power at some distance. Faster, if you will, than NATO had previously credited Russia with the ability to do.

So General Breedlove has proposed that NATO needs to carefully consider and review and in time come to some decisions about what this new development in terms of Russian military capabilities, what the implications are for NATO and how it might want to respond to that. For example, should we increase the responsiveness of the NATO Response Force?

Now the point I would press here today though is that no decisions have been taken in that regard. General Breedlove has put the issue on the table, suggested that we begin a review of it which we're just beginning to do. But all decisions at NATO of course require consensus among the 28 allies and I expect we'll spend a good deal of the summer, maybe up to the summit, trying to see where the consensus lies in terms of what if any appropriate responses NATO might want to take given Russia's demonstrable ability now to call a snap exercise and project power out of that training formation.

Journalist: This is Niilo Simojoki from Finnish News Agency in Helsinki.

As you said, Finland is participating in Sabre Strike as the only partner country. And, for example, Sweden is participating in BALTOPS at the same time. How do you see these partnerships with countries like Sweden and Finland developing in the post ISAF/Afghanistan situation? And is there going to be any changes to this?

Mr. Bell: It's a very positive and encouraging development that both Finland and Sweden and other key partners as well are willing to participate in these NATO interoperability exercises. Of course Sabre Strike was not oriented towards Russia. It was planned before the Ukraine crisis, as I've emphasized, but NATO has been quite clear these last months that while we are putting a new emphasis on collective defense, it's entirely the intention of the Alliance to maintain its capabilities and its orientation as well in terms of cooperative security and crisis management,

the other two core tasks that were sketched out in the strategic concept adopted by heads of state in Lisbon in 2010.

So if the future international security environment continues to result in situations where NATO decides to deploy military force in a crisis response operation as we did, for example, in Libya, and if it continues to be the case that key operational partners refuse to align themselves and participate in those crisis response operations, then it's certainly in everyone's benefit to enhance the training and produce more interoperability in terms of the capacity these partner nations like Finland and Sweden have to be part of these larger NATO led operations.

In February I flew up to Keflavik in Iceland to observe the exercise that was going on there with Swedish Griffins and the Finnish F/A-18s under Norwegian command and control in the air sovereignty mission that NATO, the kind of training that NATO was performing in Iceland. It was an extremely positive result. It was the first time that the full Link 16 interoperability for air operations as between NATO, Finland and Sweden had been demonstrated and validated. What that means is no matter what the future security challenge might be anywhere in the world, if Finland decides to join as Sweden did, for example, join the NATO led coalition in the Libya case, then you will have already acquired that degree of interoperability, not just in terms of the procedures and techniques and doctrine, but also in terms of the equipment so as to facilitate a stronger participation and involvement by the partner country. We will continue to put a special value on having key operational partners take part in important interoperability training exercises like Sabre Strike.

Journalist: Ewin McCaskill again. This NATO summit is now shaping up as one of the most important maybe since the end of the Cold War.

Mr. Bell: I agree. I think it's clearly the view at NATO that the Ukraine situation has been a game-changer. I'm not talking about the World Cup now. I'm talking about international security affairs. In large measure because of some of the factors I've already alluded to. Not just the aggression in Crimea but the fact that Russia has demonstrated a willingness to change international borders through the use of military force, and started this doctrine in the form of the Federation Council Duma Authorization Resolution on the Use of Russian Military Force in Neighboring States, and some of the behavior in terms of economic and political pressure. Altogether it's effectively shown that efforts these past 15 or 20 years to pull Russia into a legally-based treaty-based regime for a Europe whole and free at least in this case has been set back. And NATO in addition to affirming the immediate reassurance measures that are ongoing -- land, air and sea, from north to south across Eastern Europe at the summit -- will begin I think to come to grips with some of the questions involving longer term strategic considerations that have to be drawn given what we know now about Russian policy that we did not know at the beginning of this year.

Journalist: What we saw in Ukraine was not large-scale conventional forces. It's the use of surrogates, Russian speakers in Eastern Europe [inaudible] in Crimea. If the same thing

happened in the Baltics, and they were trying to exploit Russians in Latvia or Lithuania, how does NATO counter that?

Mr. Bell: I think there's a new realization within NATO, though it's still very early days in terms of drawing any conclusions about countermeasures and response strategies and capacities, but there is a new appreciation that Russia not only has acquired a very sophisticated capacity for what's being labeled asymmetric unattributed aggression, which is a combination of political pressure, economic pressure, cyber, propaganda, special forces, surrogates, infiltrators, equipment provision, that NATO has to ask itself is it prepared, if such types of asymmetric unattributed aggression should be directed to NATO member states covered by Article 5 where there are significant Russian-speaking populations within the borders of NATO, and I think that would be an important focus for consideration and review at NATO through the summer.

But at the same time we do have to appreciate that at two other levels more conventional application or suggested application of military power was evident the last three months as well. I mean there were, after all, 40,000 troops in armored formations, 22 or 23 battalion battle groups lined up on the Ukrainian border. I think it can be credited to NATO in large part that its quick response with the immediate reassurance measures played a role in preventing those forces from crossing the border. I don't think we can rule out that that might have been a possibility early in this crisis.

And I think we have to note as well, because the Russians certainly put great public emphasis on it, that throughout this exercise the Russians have been exercising even live fire launching of strategic nuclear forces. May 9th when the Russians were celebrating Victory in Europe Day, they invited the heads of state of several associated countries like Belarus, to come to the nuclear command facility with Secretary Putin and witness the live launches of theater and strategic nuclear forces.

So Ewen, I agree with you completely that the challenge presented by this low level, if you will, asymmetric unattributed aggression model is one that NATO has to take seriously, but NATO also needs to take seriously the implications of Russia being able to mass 40,000 troops in 22 or 23 battalion battle groups on a border so quickly, and they need to think through as well what it means that in the middle of that crisis Russia was prepared to use nuclear test launches -- not nuclear tests, but live firings of nuclear systems and flights of nuclear bombers, nuclear-capable bombers for strategic messaging purposes. That has to be part of the NATO review as well that hopefully will come to some initial conclusions in Wales on September 4th and September 5th.

Journalist: Pat Carty, Defense Press Agency, UK. I wonder if you can offer an explanation why the three B-52 bombers that arrived in the UK for Sabre Strike which were joined by the two B-2 bombers, didn't participate in the exercise?

Mr. Bell: I'm sorry, you said they did not participate?

Pat Carty: No, they didn't leave the UK.

Mr. Bell: Well, the exercise isn't over yet.

Pat Carty: They were scheduled, I understand, to attend the opening ceremony plus bombing missions, but B-2s and B-52s to date still haven't. I just wondered if there was an explanation.

Mr. Bell: I'm not in touch sitting here in NATO with the operational commanders of those units, but I would refer you, if you have access to it or perhaps Shannon can get it for you, to some very excellent reporting published today in Stars & Stripes newspaper with some very good pictures and interviews with some of the personnel from the B-52 and B-2 units, explaining what they're doing at Fairford and what their relationship is at least in the case of the B-52s to Sabre Strike and BALTOPS.

It's certainly my understanding, I don't know what's happened in the last two days, but the intention is that the aircraft will be involved in BALTOPS and Sabre Strike and that's because they are both conventional bombers as well. The B-52s and the B-2s of course have played roles in other conventional conflicts including the early days in Afghanistan. They're equipped for conventional ordnance delivery. Sabre Strike is, among other things, exercising the scenario that involves airlift and air drops and close air support, and the United States has used strategic bomber platforms, if you will, for close air support and conventional delivery before the B-52s

in the case of Sabre Strike, that was part of the planning of this exercise going well back before the Ukrainian crisis broke upon us.

Pat Carty: Thank you for that. I did attend the briefing, they just said there was no connection with Sabre Strike which confused us. But thank you.

Mr. Bell: I think there's a difference, if you will, between what the B-52s are doing and what the B-2s are doing. My understanding is that the B-2s were sent to Europe for over water, long range navigation training and interoperability work both in the UK itself. In the press conference that I read about in Stars & Stripes today, the personnel associated with the B-2 units were explaining that they had completed a long range over ocean training mission basically that stayed within the area of responsibility, the AOR, of the European Command and the African Command, in the case of the United States, that they had not gone either over Ukraine or Russia, that were over international waters in those two combatant commands areas of responsibility.

Pat Carty: Thank you.

Journalist: Heidi Jenson, again. The U.S. has sent troops to be stationed on a rotating basis in East and Central Europe. Could you confirm how many will be in the Baltic countries at any time? And also is the U.S. happy with the level of support from other NATO countries for the reassurance part?

Mr. Bell: Two questions there. The decision the U.S. took this spring was that we would deploy land-based reassurance units at about company size to each of these four countries in the north: Poland and the three Baltics. So the four companies put together are effectively a brigade. So we in effect are exercising and rotating a brigade level troop strength through these countries on the eastern frontier, if you will, of NATO. That's essentially the way the NATO Response Force is organized. It's organized to support the deployment of a brigade. So that's about right in terms of the initial stage of a conflict where you would want to deploy forces for deterrent purpose.

It's my expectation that absent a further deterioration in the situation or an escalation of the crisis which of course no one wants, that it would be the U.S. intention to rotate forces at the land unit level at about that same brigade size slip across different countries so that it effectively works out to a company in each country.

I expect that the current brigade, which is in from the 173rd in Italy, the initial replacement rotation will come in from the United States on that – the brigade that we have in Texas that is aligned with the NATO Response Force. But that given NATO's intention to maintain this persistent presence at least through the end of the year, of course we will be looking to European allies and/or Canada to identify where they then rotate in to take over from the Americans just as we rotate all sorts of allied fighter units in and out of the Baltics for Baltic Air Policing rotation slots.

Overall our sense here in the U.S. Mission to NATO is that the allies' response and contributions to the reassurance package has been quite impressive with regard to air units and certainly impressive with regard to the naval units. The area that probably still needs a little more work in terms of filling out all the matrixes to maintain the rotation slots through the end of the year is with respect to land units. That's not surprising at this stage because NATO of course is not deploying these companies into forward defensive positions in any way. They're being deployed into countries to participate in exercises and training. These are not men and women sitting in foxholes, these are men and women coming to different countries to engage in carefully planned activities like Sabre Strike.

So what NATO is doing is sort of designing exercises and adapting exercises that are planned later in the fall and into the winter to be the vehicle, sort of a plug and play concept, if you can imagine that, to be the venue, the training venue into which either Canadian or European land units with plug and play in terms of future training and exercises that's part of the reassurance plan overall.

So I think, sitting here at mid-June, we're in good shape on this package but it doesn't mean that we completely filled out the matrix. There's still work to be done in terms of completing that picture, particularly as you get further towards the end of the year.

Ewen MacAskill: Under the Bush administration and under the Obama administration the talk has been about the pivot to the Pacific. As a result of what's happened in Russia, are we noticing a pivot back to Europe? Or can America do both?

Mr. Bell: Well of course Ewen, the term the administration tries to emphasize is the word "balanced". We felt that in terms of forward deployments of U.S. forces worldwide, a certain imbalance had developed with regard to Asia in the sense that the security threats in the Pacific were becoming more numerous and more direct and we needed to rebalance our global posture to take account of that. It was never intended to be a message that we were abandoning Europe or departing Europe for the Pacific. If that were the case, why would we have decided to forward deploy four Aegis Class destroyers in Spain? Or set up missile defense sites across Europe? Or deploy the brand new U.S. Air Force Special Forces capability with the Osprey aircraft, the CV-22, to a base in England? All of those are examples of the U.S. making new investments in European security that predated the Ukrainian crisis.

But of course when you have a crisis upon you, particularly one in which the possibility of Article 5 comes into play, it must be clear when NATO convened an emergency session one week into this crisis at the request of Poland, that was because Poland invoked Article 4 of the treaty which is its right as a member state of NATO if it feels that its national security is at risk.

So the fact that NATO has been identifying these reassurance measures has been in the context of collective defense, or more precisely a deterrence of any threats that might put you into an

actual collective defense conflict. And in a situation like that I think you want your messaging to be clear. Certainly President Obama could not have been more clear in his Brussels speech this spring when he assured Europe that America's commitment is ironclad and rock solid in terms of a fundamental willingness to back up our mutual security pledge under Article 5 with U.S. capabilities wherever those U.S. capabilities might have to be drawn from worldwide.

Heidi Jenson: Would it be right to say that the U.S. now when looking at defense globally is regionalizing strategically so that you have kind of free Asia, Africa and Europe? Or -- Was that clear?

Mr. Bell: I wouldn't agree, Heidi. Obviously you have different COCOMs that have different regional areas of responsibility and the leadership of each COCOM is going to want to fight, if you will, within the bureaucracy of the Department of Defense to get as many assets forward deployed to his or her region under that COCOM Commander's authority as possible. But the fact is these capabilities are very flexible, agile and mobile globally. Whether it's bomber forces or carrier task forces or Aegis missile defense ships or brigades that train and practice for forward deployment.

If you look, for example, at Libya, at the Libyan conflict three years ago as a case study, the forces that the U.S. contributed to that NATO operation and the coalition of the willing that preceded it by one week were not limited in terms of their base of origin to the European theater. Quite the contrary, to put in place the team that was in charge of the precision real

time targeting for all the airstrikes all that summer, there were about 300 personnel who were precision targeters who were drawn from all of the COCOMs the U.S. has around the world. So the call went out, we need that capability, in part because the Europeans haven't invested in training to have people in their own services that can do this, although that's now beginning to change. But at the time of Libya there was no recourse but to reach out to all the COCOMs and pull in personnel that had the skills you needed to deal with the regional conflict that was in North Africa. The same thing happened with a lot of the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets that were also key to the precision strikes in that air campaign.

Journalist: Do you expect any decisions to be taken next week at the NATO Foreign Minister meeting that is important to the summit in Wales?

Mr. Bell: Well, the Defense Ministers just met, of course, and we got a lot done, as Secretary Hagel said in his press conference, and that's available to you on the record or Shannon can give it to you. He itemized a lot of the things the Defense Ministers got done here two weeks ago getting ready for the summit. But Secretary Hagel also said in that press conference that we got a lot done but we didn't get everything done.

So there's still important work to be done and the Foreign Ministerial next week is the last ministerial before the summit, so some of that unfinished business will be on the agenda here with Foreign Ministers. That includes things like trying to come to final agreement on our policy for greater interoperability with key partners like Finland. It has to do with the initiative that

began well before Ukraine, but certainly has relevance now in a future environment here NATO is assisting Ukraine for what's called defense capacity building: Training indigenous forces to defend themselves so NATO doesn't have to intervene. There are important decisions that have to be taken at the Foreign Minister's meeting if we can take them with regard to the new operations plan for the post 2014 in Afghanistan, and the Foreign Ministers will be having an important discussion about the four countries, the so-called aspirant countries, who are on the short list for possible future invitations to join the Alliance.

Moderator: Mr. Bell, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to these journalists. We really appreciate it.

Mr. Bell: Have a great time up there in Latvia.

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